

The First Meeting

All tutors agree that the first meeting sets the tone for subsequent sessions. There are a number of things that you should do at this meeting but it is most important to be flexible. You can come prepared with the following items:

- A plan for what you will do in the session.
- A file folder, notebook, or binder with paper on which you can write the student's name.
- Paper, lined and unlined.
- Two pens, pencils, and erasers.
- Scissors.
- A flyer, newspaper, pictures from magazines.
- A personal object such as a photo, favourite book, or keepsake.
- A poem or article that is appropriate for adults.

You should have everything set up before the session begins. A work area should be set up that is both comfortable and practical. Offer refreshments to the student if they are available.

Introductions

Begin by introducing yourself and showing genuine enthusiasm. If you are nervous, you should let your student know because it helps set the tone for an open relationship. Do not spend more than two or three minutes introducing yourself. Address the student in a professional and courteous manner and ask her how she would like to be called, and what she likes to do. Be careful not to pry. Explain first why you are asking these questions and offer information in return. This creates an open atmosphere and encourages honest answers. Some of the questions you can ask are:

What do you like to do for fun?

Do you have any hobbies?

How would you describe yourself?

What are you really good at?

What do you want to learn?

Be prepared to answer all of these questions about yourself, especially if your student is not sure or is taking a long time to answer. Sharing personal objects is an excellent way of breaking the ice.

If your student is very quiet, the amount of information that is shared at the first meeting may be very limited. If he gives very short answers to your questions, do not be concerned. Anything is a start.

Let your student know that many people have difficulty with reading and writing and how tutors can help. Tell him that in today's world everyone is involved in learning. Share some of your experiences as a learner and what you struggled with. You may want to bring to the session a story about a person who learned to read and write as an adult so that your student can see that success is possible.

If your student has particularly high expectations of herself, you may want to warn her that it takes time to reach these goals. At the same time, do not discourage her from having high hopes. There will be plenty of time to break down the major goals into more achievable chunks.

Do some reading and writing at the first meeting, if possible, so you both feel that you have begun working. By the time you meet with your student, he will already have met with the program coordinator for an interview to get a sense of what he wants to work on. You have been matched with this student because the coordinator believes you can help him achieve his goals.

Sample Activities

- Start with the Language Experience Approach (this is fully defined in the section *Tutoring strategies and activities* for beginner learners). Ask the student a question such as what did you do on the weekend, or what do you like to do. Write down what he says. Read it over with him, and then ask him to read it on his own if he is able to.
- Use the reading material you brought with you for discussion.
- Write down words that the student has trouble reading.
- Follow up on anything that has come up in your introductions to each other. (Is he interested in sports? Does he want to learn how to drive?)
- Ask your student to write a sentence. Don't correct spelling, script, or anything else but do take mental notes on what you can work on next time.
- Involve your student as much as possible. Do not write everything down if the student is able to do this themselves.

- Go through flyers or newspapers and discuss the pictures or headings.
- If your student is having difficulty with or resists writing or reading, ask if you can use a computer rather than pen and paper. The idea is to begin where the student is at and encourage learning through positive, innovative approaches and materials.

During the first meeting you will find that you come up with a number of ideas for the next session. You will probably also find that the time goes very quickly. One hour is recommended for the first meeting. If you or the student feels strained, however, you should end the session at a positive logical place. On the other hand, if you are both enthusiastic and energetic and time allows, go on longer if you wish. Before leaving, though, decide on the time and place of your next meeting as well as an idea about what you will work on.

Follow-up

After the session, write down as much as you can remember including what you did, the student's strengths, areas to work on, and ideas for learning activities. Note any materials or information you would like to bring to the next session.

As a final exercise, ask yourself the following questions:

Which activities worked? Why?

How can we review and reinforce what we worked on in an interesting way?

Was the session exciting? Did we work on a variety of activities?

Was the student comfortable? Was I?

Did I lose interest? Did the student lose interest? Why? How can we avoid this in the future?

What materials will we need next time?

Planning your Sessions

An effective method of organizing the beginning of the tutoring relationship is a worksheet. It could look something like this:

Who is the student?

Include as many adjectives or short phrases as you can that describe the student. Include age, gender, personality traits, and interests.

What are the student's strengths?

Include skills, personality traits, knowledge, and hobbies.

What does the student want to learn?

Be very specific. Do not just say “to read.” What does the student want to read? Letters, work documents, bills, newspapers, labels on food, etc.

Goals the student wants to achieve.

Set goals and target dates with your student. Review and modify this information as necessary.

Tutors have also found that it is very helpful to keep a journal with lesson plans and observations. This allows you to build on the activities that worked. You can also use a Learning Plan (for literacy learners), or a Language Learning Activity Plan (for English Language Learners). Examples of these can be found in the *Evaluation* section.